

The Role of Negative Emotions in Explaining Restaurant Customer Dissatisfaction and Behavioral Intention

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to enhance the understanding of the influence of regret and disappointment on behavioral intentions (switching/negative WOM). Specifically, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship among regret/disappointment, dissatisfaction, and switching/negative WOM in service failure situations at a restaurant. The result indicated that both regret and disappointment are significant determinants of customer dissatisfaction and switching/negative WOM. Further, the study results have shown that regret is an important predictor of switching intention, whereas disappointment is an important determinant of negative WOM. Based on these findings, managerial implications for restaurant managers are discussed.

Keywords: *regret, disappointment, dissatisfaction, behavioral intentions*

INTRODUCTION

Many studies recognize that emotions play a major role in customer (dis)satisfaction and their subsequent judgments (Erevelles and Leavitt, 1992; Mano and Oliver, 1993), and more particularly, in customer (dis)satisfaction with service encounters (Matilla and Enz, 2002; Smith and Bolton, 2002). Recent studies have also examined that the emotions—not just cognition—influence judgment, decision-making, and even post-purchase behaviors (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Oliver, 1997).

According to the specific emotions model, different negative emotions may differently impact (dis)satisfaction. For example, the negative emotions “regret” and “disappointment” can have different influences on satisfaction (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004). Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) contended that the specific emotions model can help us to better understand and predict the specific behaviors in which the customers engage. The research in the field of emotion theory has shown that different specific emotions are linked to different behavioral tendencies and consequences (Frijda et al., 1989). In addition, previous studies have shown that regret and disappointment play an important role in customers’ decision-making processes (e.g., Cooke et al., 2001; McCollough et al., 2000). Moreover, recent research emphasized the role of regret and disappointment in satisfaction and satisfaction-related behaviors (Inman et al., 1997; Taylor, 1997; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999; Zeelenberg et al., 2000).

There is a consensus regarding the positive relationship between regret/disappointment and customer dissatisfaction. However, there are still mixed and unclear results regarding the specific relationship between regret/disappointment and different types of behavioral intention, such as switching, inertia, complaint, and WOM (Mattila and Ro, 2008; Zeelenberg and Pieters 2004). Therefore, the purposes of this study are three-fold: 1) to investigate the relative effect of regret and disappointment on customer dissatisfaction; 2) to examine the effect of regret and disappointment on behavioral intention; and 3) to examine the effect of dissatisfaction on behavioral intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS

The impact of regret and disappointment on (dis)satisfaction

This study focuses on two specific emotions, regret and disappointment. Previous research suggests that these two emotions are associated with service failures and are most directly related to decision-making (Inman et al, 1997). Although other negative emotions, such as anger, shame, disgust, embarrassment, and sadness, might be experienced during or following service encounters (Oliver, 1993; Westbrook, 1987), these other emotions are not directly linked to the decision-making process (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999).

Regret and disappointment are related emotions, but they differ in the context of decision-making. Regret and disappointment share in common the fact that they are experienced when the outcome of a decision is unfavorable: They both concern “what might have been,” had things occurred differently. However, previous studies on emotions (Inman et al, 1997; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999) regarded the differences between these emotions as significantly important, arguing that they differ with respect to the conditions under which they are felt, and how they affect decision-making.

Mano and Oliver (1993) identified negative affect as an antecedent of dissatisfaction. Liljander and Strandvik (1997) demonstrated that negative emotions have a stronger impact than positive emotions on customer satisfaction. Andreassen (1999) found that customers’ initial negative emotions (e.g., disappointment, anger, surprise) that have been triggered by service failure have a significant negative impact on their satisfaction judgment of complaint resolutions. Ladhari, Brun, and Morales (2008) showed a significant negative relationship between negative consumption emotions and satisfaction. Zeelenberg and Pieter (2004) demonstrated that regret and disappointment have significantly positive relationship with customer dissatisfaction. In addition, they showed that the relative magnitude of the impact of disappointment on customer dissatisfaction is much stronger than that of regret. Drawing on their findings, we postulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Customers’ disappointment following service failures will have a stronger positive impact than regret on their dissatisfaction.

The impact of regret and disappointment on behavioral intention

Andreassen (1999) demonstrated that customers’ initial negative emotions triggered by a service failure had a significant negative impact on their future intentions. Hart et al. (1990) showed that negative emotions can lead to negative outcomes, such as complaints to the organization or negative WOM. Moreover, several studies have shown that different specific

emotions have differential influences on behavior, although they may share the same negative valence (Zeelenberg et al., 1998; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999). Zeelenberg et al. (1998) suggested that regret and disappointment differ most markedly with respect to their implications on future behaviors. Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999) indicated that regret had a direct influence on customer switching, independent of the effects of dissatisfaction. Since regret is related to self-blame for the bad experience from service failure, customers' complaint behavior and negative communication are not likely to be direct responses of expressing their dissatisfaction (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004). Based on the previous literature, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Customers' regret will have a positive effect on their switching.

Disappointment is felt when actual service delivery fails to meet customers' expectations, customers tend to assign blame to the service provider. Thus, customers who experience strong disappointment are more likely to receive sympathy by spreading negative WOM and complaint behavior (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004). On the other hand, the relationship between disappointment and switching is still not clear. Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) expect that the positive link between disappointment and switching behavior may apply only in the special circumstance. They predict the disappointment is not likely to serve as a strong predictor of customer switching behavior. However, their findings showed results that contradicted their expectation by showing a positive relationship. Thus, drawing on their findings, we propose that disappointment has a positive influence on switching and negative WOM, and the magnitude of influence is larger for negative WOM than switching. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Customers' disappointment following service failure will have a stronger positive effect on their negative WOM intention than on their switching intention.

The impact of dissatisfaction on behavioral intention

Ample research has shown that dissatisfied consumers are more likely to switch than are satisfied customers (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004; Rust and Zahorik, 1993). Richins (1983) showed that customer dissatisfaction leads to negative WOM and complaint behavior. Wangenheim (2005) illustrated that dissatisfied switchers tend to show higher post-switching negative WOM in the telecommunications industry. Based on the aforementioned literature, the following hypothesis is offered:

H4: Customers' dissatisfaction will have a positive effect on their switching and negative WOM intention.

Fig. 1 illustrates a conceptual model that expresses the relationships among regret/disappointment, dissatisfaction, and switching intention/negative WOM.

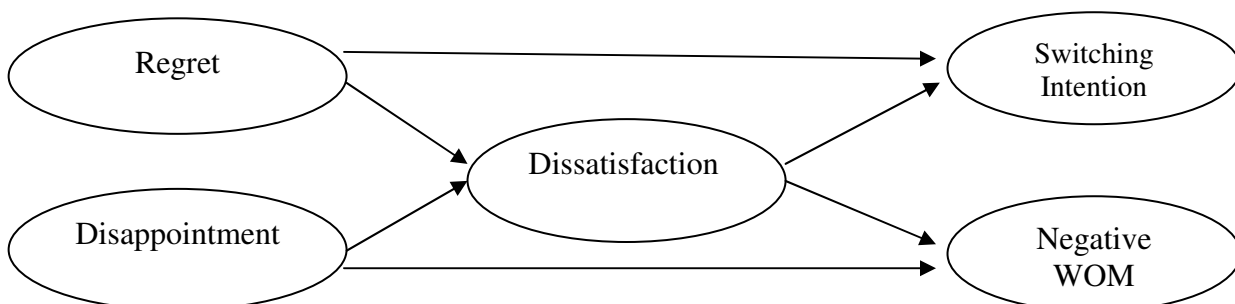


Fig. 1. Conceptual model

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The four research hypotheses were tested through the use of scenario-based experiments. The service failure scenario was developed based on our literature review, a pilot test, and expert review. The scenario describes a service failure scene in a fine-dining restaurant: The customers sat at the table and a service provider came to their seat and tried to pour water into their glasses on the table. Instead, however, the service provider made a mistake and accidentally spilled the water on the customers' clothes.

Sample and data collection

Data were collected using a consumer panel of a large reputed marketing research company. A quota-sampling method was adopted for data collection. The number of questionnaires distributed in each city was based on the size of the population in six large cities. The respondents were given questionnaires containing measures of emotions, dissatisfaction, and behavioral intentions. A total of 2,500 panelists participated in the present study. Among them, after deleting incomplete responses, a total of 1,997 were retained for final analysis.

Measurement

The questionnaire was composed of three parts. First, the emotions and dissatisfaction items were adopted from the study of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004). The two specific emotions, regret and disappointment, were measured by answering the following two questions: "After this experience, how much regret did you feel over your choice of the restaurant?" and "After this experience, how much disappointment did you feel about the delivery of the service?" In addition, dissatisfaction was measured by answering the question, "Overall, how dissatisfied were you with the delivery of the service?" Finally, behavioral response items were selected from the studies of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) and Mattila and Ro (2008). Negative WOM was adopted from Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) and was measured as follows: "I will speak to my friends and relatives about my bad experience." Switching intention, adopted from Mattila and Ro (2008), was measured thus: "I will switch to a competing restaurant." All items were accompanied by a 7-point scale, ranging from not at all (1) to very strongly (7).

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows 15.0. Multiple regression analyses were used to test the postulated hypotheses in this study. First, regression analyses were conducted to examine the relative effect of regret and disappointment on the customers' dissatisfaction. Next, the effect of regret and disappointment on the customers' behavioral intention was analyzed.

RESULTS

The effect of regret and disappointment on dissatisfaction

In order to test the relative effect of regret and disappointment on customer dissatisfaction, multiple regression analysis was used to investigate whether either regret or disappointment had stronger effects on customer dissatisfaction. Approximately 15% ($R^2 = .145$)

of the variance of the customer dissatisfaction was explained by regret and disappointment (Table 1). The significant F-ratio (F value = 168.936, $p < .001$) clearly demonstrates that the proposed regression model has reasonable explanation power. Regret, as a predictor of guest dissatisfaction, has a positive relationship with customer dissatisfaction as a response variable ($t = 5.846$, $p < 0.001$). That is, restaurant customers who had higher levels of regret are likely to show high levels of customer dissatisfaction. Disappointment also has a positive association with customer dissatisfaction ($t = 11.066$, $p < .001$). Highly disappointed customers tend to exhibit high levels of dissatisfaction. In terms of comparison of coefficients, however, disappointment has a stronger impact on customer dissatisfaction than regret does. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 1
Effect of regret and disappointment on dissatisfaction
Dissatisfaction

	$\beta(SE)$	t	VIF
Regret	.147(.023)	5.846***	1.470
Disappointment	.278(.027)	11.066***	1.490
Adj.R ²	.145		
F value	168.936		
P value	.000		

** Significant at .05 level. *** Significant at .01 level

The effect of regret, disappointment, and dissatisfaction on behavioral intention

In order to test the hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, multiple regression analyses were used to investigate the effect of regret, disappointment, and dissatisfaction on behavioral intention. Approximately 15% ($R^2 = .149$) of the variance of the negative WOM and 30% ($R^2 = .299$) of the variance of the switching intention were explained by regret, disappointment, and dissatisfaction (Table 2).

Regret, as a predictor of switching intention, has a positive relationship with switching intention as a response variable ($t = 15.068$, $p < 0.001$), which lends support for hypothesis 2. Contrary to our expectations, disappointment ($t = 9.727$, $p < 0.001$) and dissatisfaction ($t = 4.095$, $p < 0.001$) were found to be significant predictors of customer switching behavior. These findings are consistent with those of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004). An interesting point to make is that their findings showed that disappointment was a stronger predictor of switching than regret was, which was inconsistent with their expectations. Our findings at least demonstrate that regret has a much stronger impact on switching than disappointment does, which confirms that regret is the primary driver of switching. Our findings are consistent with the original postulation of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) and the proposed hypothesis of Mattila and Ro (2008).

Disappointment has a significantly positive impact on negative WOM ($t = 12.170$, $p < .001$) and switching intention ($t = 9.727$, $p < .001$). Our finding confirms the hypothesis proposed by Mattila and Ro (2008), which is also consistent with the findings of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004). In terms of a comparison of coefficients and t values, disappointment has a stronger impact on negative WOM than on switching intention. Thus, hypothesis 3 is also supported.

In addition, dissatisfaction has a positive association with negative WOM ($t = 2.020$, $p < .05$) and switching intention ($t = 4.095$, $p < .001$). Highly dissatisfied customers are more likely to demonstrate high levels of switching intention and to spread more negative WOM communication. Thus, hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 2
Effect of regret, disappointment, and dissatisfaction on behavioral intention

	<i>Negative WOM</i>			<i>Switching Intention</i>		
	$\beta(SE)$	t	VIF	$\beta(SE)$	t	VIF
Regret	.083(.026)	3.270***	1.495	.346(.023)	15.068***	1.469
Disappointment	.314(.031)	12.170***	1.561	.228(.027)	9.727***	1.561
Dissatisfaction	.045(.025)	2.020**	1.169	.083(.022)	4.095***	1.171
Adj. R^2	.149			.299		
F value	116.633			283.117		
P value	.000			.000		

** Significant at .05 level. *** Significant at .01 level.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study attempts to advance the knowledge in the interrelationship among regret/disappointment, dissatisfaction, switching, and negative WOM. The results of regression analysis indicate that both regret and disappointment were significant determinants of customer dissatisfaction. Consistent with our expectations, our results confirmed that disappointment has a stronger influence on customer dissatisfaction than regret does. This finding offers important managerial implications to restaurant operators. The restaurant manager should understand that disappointment, which is derived from blaming guest-contact service employees for the failed service, has a much stronger impact on customer dissatisfaction than does regret, another emotion which is evoked from self-blame during their restaurant selection. In order to enhance the overall customer satisfaction of a unit, restaurant managers should make an effort to reduce the levels of disappointment following service failures.

The effect of regret, disappointment, and dissatisfaction on behavioral intention was also tested. As expected, regret was found to be an important predictor of switching intention, which is in line with the findings of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004). One of the academic contributions of this study is to confirm empirically that regret plays a much more important role in predicting customer switching behavior than disappointment does. Our findings clearly confirm the original postulation of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) and the proposed hypothesis of Mattila and Ro (2008); however, both of the previous studies failed to show the empirical evidence.

Disappointment is positively associated with both negative WOM and switching intention, which reinforces the previous claim proposed by Mattila and Ro (2008) and the empirical findings of Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004). Beyond the simple relationship between disappointment and negative WOM/switching, we examine the relative effect of disappointment on behavioral intention. Disappointment is found to be a more important determinant of negative WOM than switching. In other words, restaurant customers who are deeply disappointed are more likely to express their negative emotions by spreading negative WOM rather than deciding

to exit. This finding provides a very important lesson to restaurant management, because most customers will give the guilty restaurant another chance by only verbally expressing their frustration until they finally decide to exit. Restaurant management should be proactive to detect a customer's growing disappointment, which will facilitate escalating customer complaints and spreading negative WOM.

Finally, several limitations of this study should be recognized. First, depending on different cultures, respondents may show different interpretations of the service failure scenario, which may result in different reactions to the outcome variables: dissatisfaction and behavioral intention. Future research may extend this research across different countries and cultures. Second, the measurement of behavioral intention needs to be expanded to include inertia (silence) and complaint to fully reflect the complex consumer behavioral responses. Future research may examine the moderating effect of gender and the severity of service failure on the relationship between customer dissatisfaction and behavioral intention.

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